



Volume 10  
Issue 2 June

Article 16

May 1983

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### Recommended Citation

Mathews, Gary (1983) "Social Work PAC's and State Social Work Associations Purpose, History, and Action Strategies," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol10/iss2/16>

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**SOCIAL WORK PAC'S AND STATE SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATIONS  
PURPOSE, HISTORY, AND ACTION STRATEGIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

Social work as a profession has only recently become politically active. One consequence of this interest in the political process has been the proliferation of political action committees as creatures of the National Association of Social Workers and its state chapters. Social work PAC's are a key ingredient necessary to enable the profession to influence public policy. Perhaps because political action committees are new to NASW, or perhaps because NASW is new to politics, very little has been written about the history, purpose or strategic implications of these committees.

This paper will trace the development and operation of PAC's and their relation to the state chapters of NASW. The Michigan Political Action for Candidate Election Committee (PACE)<sup>1</sup> will be utilized to illustrate key points.

**Purpose**

What is a political action committee? It is a legal entity established for the purpose of supporting political candidates and issues. PAC's are regulated by the Federal Election Campaign Act ("FECA") and its 1976 amendments. The reasons for establishing a PAC quickly explain their sudden proliferation.

FECA prohibits associations like NASW from making campaign contributions but allows them to "establish, administer and solicit contributions to a 'separate segregated fund' whose sole purpose is to make political contributions and expenditures." (Webster, 1979) There are tax advantages. There is the selling point that all money contributed to candidates will go to candidates since the association can pay expenses. Another advantage is spending limitations. While individuals are limited to \$1,000 per candidate, PAC's may spend up to \$5,000 per candidate per election. Finally, according to the American Society of Association Executives, "...the association which establishes a PAC may control the PAC completely with respect to its income and expenditures. For example, the association may decide who will be solicited by the PAC and which candidates for public office will be supported." (Webster, 1979)

This is a persuasive list of advantages to an organization for operating a PAC. There are other advantages in addition to the legal, tax and control issues. The Michigan NASW PAC lists among its objectives, in addition to helping the election of candidates:

"-to promote the adoption of public policy that is in the interest of the social work profession and those they serve.

-to promote political awareness and lawful political action among the members of the social work profession." (Mi-Pace brochure, 1980)

So it would seem that at least one state chapter of NASW is seizing the vehicle of the PAC to serve as a locus for political activity beyond providing contributions to campaign coffers. What is behind this increased political activity by state chapters of NASW, and how does it fit with the issue of social work and political activity in general?

**History**

The debate over whether or not social workers have an obligation to be active

politically is as old as the profession itself. Jane Addams made her opinion known thusly: "When the ideas and measures we have long been advocating become part of a political campaign, would we not be the victims of a curious self-consciousness if we failed to follow them there?" (Lasch, 1965) By the early 1960's social workers had developed a reputation as political lightweights in stark contrast to the style of the social reformers like Jane Addams and her contemporaries.

Abraham Ribicoff, then Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare admonished the profession, saying: "I am sure that I am not the first to tell you that you have not wielded your influence to anywhere near the degree your unique fund of knowledge and your skill at working with people might warrant. This truth ought to be a challenge to your profession to take an active part in shaping laws and policies." (Ribicoff, 1962) Research by Wolk indicated that, in fact, "...social workers are political members of society..." (Wolk, 1981) using well tested criteria.

If a gap has existed between Wolk's findings and the contemporary image of the social worker as nonpolitical, one answer that suggests itself is that social workers have been active as autonomous citizens "...while individual social workers are politically active, the profession as a whole does not have a record of political efficacy. The problem then may be a lack of political influence rather than a lack of political activity." (Mathews 1982) This hypothesis was supported when a group of state and federal legislators were asked to rate six professional organizations for political influence. Of the six, NASW was ranked last and was virtually unknown to a quarter of the respondents. (Mathews 1982) Collective action is powerful action and in the mid 1970's a national political action committee, dubbed PACE (Political Action for Candidate Election) was formed. The first state chapter PACE was initiated in 1978 in Florida. This well-organized effort was to serve as a model for virtually all of the state chapters to follow suit. Their by-laws, for example, were used as a basis for the by-laws of other PACE committees. In the five years since Florida led the way, between 30 and 35 state chapters of NASW have formed PACE committees.<sup>2</sup> Some see the development of PACE committees as a positive sign. "The creation of political action committees by NASW chapters across the country represents a new level of mature involvement in the political system and a recognition that even good politicians realistically expect professions to put their money and their volunteer hours behind their values." (Abrams and Goldstein in Mahaffey and Hanks, 1982)

### Strategies for Action

How do state chapters organize a PACE and once it begins, what considerations are involved in the implementation of its activity? Every challenge involves overcoming obstacles. What are the obstacles and how can state chapters anticipate, minimize or overcome them?<sup>3</sup> What are some of the most common myths that we as social workers hold about the political process? A question of equal importance is one of theory. What theoretical perspectives provide the basis for decision-making? Which informed perspective directs the machinery once constructed?

Initiation of a PACE by a state chapter of NASW is necessary to the support of local candidates and issues. For legal and organizational reasons, a state PACE is required to be separate and distinct from the national NASW PACE. Moreover, there are significant areas of social policy which are operationalized at the state level. Some examples of these decision-making areas are welfare, mental health and education. Other policy controversies occurring at the state level are the ERA, capital punishment, and abortion. (Lause 1979)

Several important ingredients are necessary to the successful initiation of a state PACE. The first ingredient is a strong and genuine interest in a politi-

cal action committee by the state NASW chapter board of directors. The active support of the chief executive officer is also a key. Next, a small cadre of people willing to serve as active members of the PACE committee must be recruited. They will ideally have similar goals for the committee and not have diverse intentions.

Barbaro has noted that increased political activity by social workers is aided by "...a desire to maintain a consistent organizational self image (Barbaro) Another finding by the same author bears out the experience of the state PACE committees. He reports that "The amount of organizational resources had little impact on a groups decision to become involved in an issue." (Barbaro, 1978)

Once Board support is established and a small group is convened the next step is usually to solicit expert advice. The national office has been generous in supplying a staff person to the state chapters.<sup>4</sup> Along with advice copies of sample by-laws (a la Florida PACE) are customarily supplied. The next step is filing with the State Board of Elections or a similar state agency and the work of the committee may begin in earnest.

There are three tasks which most state chapter PACE committees must accomplish to be successful. One is to endorse candidates and issues at the state level. Another is contributing financially and otherwise to their campaigns. A third is spreading the word among the membership of the state NASW that politics is an activity worthy of their time, their attention, and their money.

All three tasks are important and all three are closely connected. They require communication with the grass roots of the organization membership. This communication is time consuming but is at the heart of the success of the whole process. If the committee does not garner the support, opinions, enthusiasm and money of the membership the committee fails to function effectively.

For these reasons the state PACE must use every available means of communication. The state chapter newsletter provides an immediate means of doing so. A highly visible presence at the annual state program meeting is helpful. Guest speaking at local unit meetings is another tactic. The organization of special forums to speak to special policy issues is a tactic which is often useful in election years.

One illustration of the application of the above tactics is the Michigan PACE response to a proposed tax issue in the 1980 election. Proposal D, also referred to as the Tisch Tax Cut was a proposed gigantic tax cut which would have reduced the state budget by 57%. PACE mobilized the chapter membership in a variety of ways.

The October, 1980 issue of the Chapter Newsletter was filled with articles directly or indirectly coming from PACE. The front page consisted of a letter by the President of the Board opposing the tax cut, an article about how the state chapter had joined a coalition called "Citizens to Save Our State" (from Tisch), and an article about the Chapter formally opposing the tax cut. Headlines from the remainder of that issue of the newsletter are self-explanatory:

- Highlights of the Property Tax Reform Proposals
- Suggestions for Follow-up in Your Community Regarding the Tax Proposals
- Overview of Budget Implications of Tax Proposals
- M-PACE Announces Endorsements
- Debbie Stabenow: Social Worker in the State Capitol<sup>5</sup>

In other words, of eight feature stories in that issue, six were about the tax cut and the other two were about PACE endorsements of candidates for state office.

Members of the state PACE committee also made presentations at almost every local unit meeting in the months preceeding the election. A special mailing went out two weeks before the election from the M-PACE chair, opposing the Tisch Tax Cut. A final touch was a statewide Tisch Tax-cut Workshop which was held in the state capitol. Speaking at this workshop were the Director of The Michigan Department of Social Services, sev-

eral state legislators, and other state officials. This well-attended workshop had other significant pay-offs. Without exception, the speakers commented on how pleased they were that social workers were getting politically involved. Ironically, the Director of D.S.S., a non-social worker, stated that the only other contact he had experienced from NASW was a letter opposing his appointment from the Detroit Metropolitan Unit years ago.

As a post-script, the Tisch Tax-cut was soundly defeated. Who is to say that the PACE committee's work did not contribute somewhat to that defeat?

Another subject of communication with the membership is the myths and fallacies many social workers hold about politics. Few, if any, schools of social work offer courses on the role of social work in politics. Most social workers still talk in conflict neutral terms like social planning, policy analysis, and program development as if these endeavors occurred external to a political process. Nothing could be further from the truth. Political social work takes stands on the issues, fights to have those positions win out over other positions and then defends and participates actively in the consequences of those positions. Social workers have been operating under some prevailing myths. Seven of these are presented below.<sup>6</sup>

#### Seven Political Myths Commonly Held By Social Workers

- Myth 1. Campaign work is the best way to influence politicians.  
Campaign work is important but is often not the most effective pathway to influence. Virginia W. Smith wrote an excellent article which explains the wide variety of ways to influence legislators. (Virginia Smith, 1979)
- Myth 2. A letter-writing campaign is only effective if hundreds or thousands of letters can be generated.  
Amazing as it may seem, at the state level, if a legislator receives as few as three letters on a topic, they consider it to be a "hot" issue!
- Myth 3. The only way to lobby effectively is to hire a professional lobbyist.  
Professional lobbyists are a complement to a well-organized, politically active professional association, not a substitute for an involved constituency. Lacking an involved membership, a professional lobbyist is a waste of money.
- Myth 4. Politicians already know what social work is about and how we stand on the issues, so there is no need to get involved.  
Most politicians have a narrow and distorted opinion of what social work is and rarely associate our profession with legislative issues.
- Myth 5. Politicians already have their minds made up on legislative votes so why lobby?  
The fact that politicians are open to tactics aimed at capturing their votes is corroborated by the immense organizational structure and resources established for that purpose. Put another way, if lobbying did not work, there would not be so many people and organizations doing it.
- Myth 6. Liberal politicians enjoy social workers and are happy to talk to them. Conservatives do not like social workers and avoid them whenever possible.  
The authors research discovered that some conservative politicians would like more contact from social workers and feel "snubbed" by the profession. At the same time, some liberal politicians consider themselves well enough acquainted with social work issues that they prefer less frequent contacts.
- Myth 7. Rural legislators are less likely to want contact with social workers than are urban legislators.  
Rural legislators are often interested in meeting social workers and, having fewer resources of all kinds within their districts, are often anxious to take advantage of possible contacts.

There are four important obstacles to the formation of statewide political action committees for social work professionals. These four obstacles, while not all inclusive, are a useful beginning list. They are: geography, leadership, finances, and a hostile public arena.

1. Geography--Most states are large enough to make regular travel even to a centrally located chapter office problematic. This distance barrier is exacerbated by skyrocketing gasoline prices. This concern is generic to the state organization of the chapters and as such, is one understood and acknowledged by most NASW members. In Michigan this problem is made more difficult by the fact that a constituency exists in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, which is, at its furthest point a longer drive than from Detroit to New York City.

It is important to hold meetings in a centrally located place so that no one has to drive an inordinate distance. In Michigan, as in most other states, the largest metropolitan area is not centrally located geographically. This means that perhaps a third to a half of the persons attending any given meeting will be coming from the urban area of the state and can carpool. Another part to solving the dilemma of long distance travel is to be prepared for less than perfection. For instance, a representative from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was invited to participate in our meetings and this did not occur. On the other hand everyone can fully appreciate the extreme hardship of travel to and from the UP and there were no hard feelings.

Communication is also important as a way of overcoming distances, and this issue has already been addressed.

2. Leadership--It was our experience that for the most part the established leadership of the social work political scene did not come to meetings and did not participate actively in developing the political action committee. They did become involved later in the process. Those who did participate early on were reliable, responsible, and willing to take risks. It did not matter whether they were extremely well-connected or not. It seemed that where one person was weak or poorly informed, another committee member would be knowledgeable. Fear of inadequacy is an initial concern that is quickly dispelled.

In retrospect, it is clear that the "big wheels" have neither the time nor the energy to do the grassroots work required to make a success of PACE. It also has become clear as the PACE Committee members gained experience they developed competence, contacts and confidence, to "play hard ball with the big boys."<sup>7</sup> While the original Michigan PACE Committee members were by no means the most well-connected and well-established social workers in the state, several of them have developed into political heavyweights. Since the Committee's initial successes, it has recently boasted two past national presidents of NASW as members.

3. Money, money, money--Money is important. But it is so much less important than we think. The Michigan PACE budget for 1980 was about \$1,300. A laughable sum when compared with most other PAC's, and a sum that was so insignificant that it caused innumerable problems in dealing with the State campaign finance bureaucrats. They just couldn't accept that the budget was so small. Politicians are moved by more than money, though, just as social workers are motivated by more than money. As a matter of fact, there is almost a reverse snobism attached to receiving contributions from a political action committee as poor as the Michigan PACE. It could be argued that receiving a \$50 donation from us is in some ways more a symbol of support than receiving \$500 would be from a wealthy committee. A state legislator in Michigan mentions nine kinds of power that are available to organizations seeking to influence government. These include: money, use of media, relationships, positions, unity, coalitions, numbers, knowledge, voting.<sup>8</sup>

To read the media or to watch TV one could easily conclude that political action committees are only as effective as the size of the purses. It is widely

believed to be true that large budget equals large political influence while small budget equals small political influence. Social workers have never been known for their affluency, nor for their ability to contribute large sums of money to worthy causes. This could lead one to conclude that a social work political action committee is defeated before it begins, but it is just not true.

4. The Public Arena--In spite of the fact that social workers find many job opportunities in the public sector, we are reluctant to approach the bureaucracy as consumers. We have perhaps become too comfortable with making the rules and playing the game from a position of power in our narrow segment of government programs to adapt to the quite different role of the participant or customer. When dealing with the State Board of Election and the Secretary of State's office, it becomes clear all too quickly that we are just another person standing in line rather than the one giving out the numbers. Along with this difficulty in negotiating the maze of government regulations is a lack of familiarity in dealing with politicians. Many of us see politicians as intimidating, disparaging, and for the most part opponents in terms of philosophy. It is easy to develop a sense of being overwhelmed by the rules and regulations on one hand and the necessity of dealing directly with politicians and their staff members on the other. Perhaps the most important thing to remember in an ongoing relationship with the state campaign finance division is that a committee treasurer familiar with finances and reporting is essential. As far as politicians being intimidating and the political arena being overwhelming, experience is a good teacher. Experience and familiarity removes the mystery from political relationships.

Why participate in your state PAC? What could possibly come from participating on a political action committee? It is easy to develop a scenario in which one will receive criticism from many constituencies and appreciation by few. Perhaps nowhere else in the structure of the profession is visibility more a guarantee than in the political arena. Social workers are often trained to take a back seat, to stay out of the limelight, and to be in a supporting role. But when the issues are public and the other players in the game are public, then social workers must be prepared to go public as well.

There are no doubt many other obstacles to the implementation of state political action committees. In addition to the ones discussed above, there are the problems of minority representation, of open versus closed meetings, of selection criteria for the endorsement of candidates, of separation of finances between the political action committee and the rest of the chapter organization, of educating the membership, and the usual stresses and strains of committee decision-making.

This discussion of state chapter PAC's would be incomplete without mention of the mission of the enterprise. Are social work PAC's destined to be self-serving mechanisms for more exclusive licensing legislation? And if our newly acquired political clout is used to benefit our clients instead, will the aim be at "deficient individuals" or at the problems inherent in the social structure? There is a distinct choice to be made here and a knowledge of sociological theory is helpful in making it.

Goroff tells us that conflict theory applies directly to politics but that there are actually two kinds. "Marx postulates the existence of ruling elite based on ownership of the means of production....The pluralist view is that interest groups compete with each other...that no one group is strong enough to gain complete power or control...." He goes on to point out that social workers choose either to acknowledge the basic structural changes needed or to "champion worthy causes separate and apart from issues of social class. (Goroff, 1978) Regardless of what choices are made, it is encouraging to note that social workers are at least entering the "ball park" and familiarizing themselves with the basic rules of the game. Social workers are undeniably becoming more aware of political power and the steps necessary to obtain it. During the 1982 elections more than \$7,000 was contributed to the Michigan PACE, up from \$1,300 in 1980.

Also, for the first time in recent memory, hundreds of hours of volunteer time was donated, not by individuals who happened to be social workers but by social workers as social workers. Finally, social workers are learning the meaning of power. Once that happens eventually the knowledge could filter down to clients.

"Power has to do with whatever decisions men make about the arrangements under which they live, and about the events which make up the history of their times ...the problem of who is involved in making them is the basic problem of power. In so far as they could be made but are not, the problem becomes who fails to make them?" (Mills, 1963)

#### NOTES

1. PACE is the name that the national office and all of the state chapters of NASW have taken for their political action committees.
2. This estimate was obtained during a telephone conversation to the national office of NASW in May, 1983.
3. Material for this section came in part from a presentation made by the author at the "Social Workers in Politics Conference", Washington, D.C., 1981.
4. Ms. Carol Sheffer-Hartman, PACE staff person of the national office of NASW has traveled extensively to encourage and cultivate the development and operation at PAC's at the state level.
5. State Representative Stabenow, M.S.W., was endorsed by the Michigan PACE and is now serving her third term in the state legislature. Rep. Stabenow sponsored the 1982 Michigan Children's Trust Fund Legislation which includes an innovative voluntary \$2 checkoff on state income tax forms which goes to child abuse prevention programs.
6. These myths were first identified and addressed following the completion of a Field Studies in Research and Practice project entitled "Southwest Michigan Politicians: Influence and Interactions with Social Workers", 1981, Western Michigan University School of Social Work. This material was presented in slightly different form at the 5th Annual Social Workers in Politics Conference, sponsored by NASW and PACE, Washington, D.C., April, 1982.
7. While this is hardly an original statement, Michigan readers will recognize it as a favorite saying of Patricia Curran, current chairperson, Michigan PACE.
8. Hon. David Hollister, Michigan House of Representatives.

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